

## **The Struggle for Hope**

*A speech on the 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Citizens for Public Justice and the Public Justice Resource Centre, London, Friday, April 23, 2004*

By Susan Eagle, United Church Minister, London City Councillor

Tonight when we were being asked to put up our hands to remember how long we have been aware of Citizens for Public Justice (CPJ), I was trying to think back to when it was. It certainly was in the '70s, but especially in the 1980s, when I became the United Church representative to the Interfaith Social Assistance Reform Coalition (ISARC) and I met first Gerald Vandezande and then Greg deGroot-Maggetti. It really has been a wonderful experience to be associated with CPJ over those many years.

I received a blessing the other day from a man who seemed unlikely to give it. Sitting in the comfort and warmth of my car at an intersection, I noticed a man hunched over to keep the wind and the rain out of his face. His hair was wet and stringy; his clothes, scruffy and torn; a worn and dirty bag over his shoulders seemed to amount to all that he had in the whole world that he owned. He was walking along the line of cars that were stopped, letting it be known that he would receive money if it were offered.

I put some money in the proffered hand and expected the usual, mumbled, thank-you. Instead I watched his face turn into an electric grin and his eyes warm with pleasure. They were not eyes that offered gratitude, but pleasure. "God bless," he said, and moved on. And I felt blessed by that benediction. Not because I had done this charitable thing, in fact he had not said thank-you. Instead there had been eye-to-eye contact and a reciprocal exchange. My money, his blessing. And I left the intersection with the feeling that that had been the best parting of money that I had experienced all day.

I puzzled a little, though, about his obvious grace and cheerfulness. He didn't seem to have much to be thankful for. His deprived existence flew in the face of all our social norms that teach us that happiness is the result of acquisition and personal security. Then I reflected that I was coming here to talk to you about the struggle for hope, that elusive quality that can sustain life and determination in those whose futures seem grim and painful, and yet can seem lost to an entire generation that suffers from a surfeit of affluence and self-gratification.

Let me start tonight by describing for you those many places where I see either lack of hope or loss of hope in our systems and institutions. It seems that part of our loss of hope is in the many battles that we keep losing. We seem to be losing the battle for economic equity. The wealth gap is growing. A recent study by the Federation of Canadian Municipalities entitled "The Quality of Life Report," documents that in the last decade, the wealthiest 30 percent of the population enjoyed a before-tax income increase, while the poorest 30 percent actually suffered a before-tax decrease of 10 percent or more loss of income.

The same report documents that rents increased faster in the bottom end of the housing market than in the higher end. Those spending less than 30 percent of their income on rent grew from 35 percent of renters in 1991 to 41 percent in 2001. And those spending more than 50 percent of their income on rent went from 16 to 20 percent.

All our cities have seen a huge increase in numbers of families living in shelters as well as in people on waiting lists for subsidized housing, sometimes waiting for years, and often losing existing housing while waiting for subsidized housing to become available.

The Federation of Canadian Municipalities "Quality of Life" report says that in all cities studied there is continuing income inequity and social exclusion, as well as pressure on the environment. And it concludes that quality of life in those communities remains fragile. In Ontario we've seen a dismantling of a social safety net that has made life more fragile for people at the bottom. It has targeted, excluded, trivialized and even criminalized those struggling to survive each day. From 1994 to today tax cuts have meant an \$11 billion per-annum decrease in provincial revenues, and program spending has been reduced from 15 percent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 1994 to 11 percent today. We're spending less GDP on programs than we were.

Those statistics come to us from the Ontario Alternative Budget Analysis, which goes on to suggest that if the province freezes taxes at the current level, it will have to consider cutting a further \$2 billion if it wants to balance the budget.

That's the financial and economic equity battle we're losing in Ontario, but there's another of equal concern. It's the attitudinal battle. The shift in public thinking from entitlement to deservedness gave us workfare, lifetime welfare bans, and incredibly onerous criteria for anyone wanting to access social services.

Perhaps most reprehensible of all, it was done with the slick assurance that it was all for the public good. So legislation marginalizing and punishing the poor was named: Tenant Protection Act; Ontario Works Act; Safe Streets Legislation; Education Improvement; even the Ontario Disabilities Support Plan. All euphemisms that were for the most part swallowed by members of an unsuspecting public.

Has the change in provincial government changed that public attitude? I don't believe it has. I believe it is still very well entrenched. That attitude has allowed our London Housing Corporation, which oversees all public housing in the city and the county, to last night approve having staff develop a policy that would require prospective tenants to submit to a check so those with a criminal record could be excluded from tenancy. Is this the product of a new kinder, gentler Ontario?

The hostile attitude to the undeserving has become entrenched and judgmental. This concept of banning those with criminal records was sold to the public members of the Housing Corporation Board last night as a way to protect tenants and provide safer housing for everybody. It leaves me to wonder if the most insidious evil in contemporary society is

the one that can be rationalized and justified, and which masquerades under the false guise of righteousness and public good. It ensnares those people who are not fluent in prophetic analysis.

When I look at losses, there is a great deal of lost ground which, despite rhetoric to the contrary, continues to undermine our communities and promise grim milestones for the future. Yet I believe documenting our losses is an important part of our rebuilding, and a critical element in any hopeful response we might make. On that note, let me turn to the subject of hope, for which we need to struggle.

You're probably wondering by now if my address is really about hope, or if I should have titled it, "Just when I thought things were bad, they got worse." I believe, though, that hope has to be born out of the reality we face. Ignoring it just turns hope into false optimism.

In his book, *History and the Theology of Liberation*, Enrique Dussel defines prophecy as discovering the meaning of the present. He adds that the word prophecy comes from the Greek word, "prophemy – which means to speak out before someone." The prophet's job is to speak out before the people, telling them the meaning of events taking place here and now. So I believe our first job in building and reclaiming hope in our communities is not to avoid the pain but rather to both name and expose the reality of what is happening to our people. For the most part, that makes us prophetic and unpopular.

I had a lawyer in one of our legal clinics say to me the other day, "Wouldn't it be nice just to be liked?" He'd had a particularly brutal day of advocating against the system, challenging social service regulations and the decisions that flowed from them.

So we consider the challenge to be faithful, though not necessarily successful. It reminds us, for the most part, and brings us to the inevitable discomfort, even alienation that we are going to feel when we name and expose those places of disconnect we experience in the world around us.

Jesus' command to his disciples to be in the world but not of it, opens the door for that jarring sense of discomfort that we might call conscience or prophetic awareness. It resonated with me a few years ago when I picked up William Stringfellow's book called *Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land*. That discomfort leads us to view the world with a critical self-awareness that isn't always easy to sustain.

A woman coming home after a particularly grueling day of battling the world around her said to her husband, "All I really want is peace and quiet and flowers." Her dear husband said, "I believe they call that a funeral."

So we face the fact that the world around us is sometimes painful, hostile and often devoid of the easy miracles we would like to see. Speaking of easy miracles, the story is told of a good Christian woman who read the Bible every day. She treasured a favourite passage from Isaiah – 'the lion will lie down with the lamb.' One day she went to the zoo and came upon

a lion cage where something incredible was taking place. Inside the cage was a huge, ferocious lion and sitting right next to it was a lamb. In total amazement she called over to the guard. "How long have you had a lion and a lamb in that cage together?" she asked. "For more than a year," the guard answered. "That's amazing. How do you do it?" "It's easy," said the guard, "every morning we just put in a new lamb."

Reality isn't easy for those of us who would prefer easy miracles. It's not easy for those who ask questions and expose grim truths. But it opens the door to the knowledge of work that needs to be done and truths that need to be told if we are ever to hope for a different relationship and a different kind of community.

It is in the name of that truth-telling that ISARC collected stories. Indeed, it was a labour of love for us to go around the community, sit down with people and spend the time to hear stories that came from the heart. There's no way in that book (*Lives in the Balance*) we could possibly collect all the stories that were shared, but they were amazing stories. Stories of survival in grim circumstances.

In his book, *Seeds*, Thomas Merton writes: "the theology of love must seek to deal realistically with evil and injustice in the world, and not merely to compromise with them." Theology does not exist merely to appease the already troubled conscience of the powerful and the established. A theology of love is a theology of resistance: a refusal of the evil that reduces a brother to homicidal desperation.

Where did we ever get the idea that to be Christian, we should also be comfortable? Naming truths and exposing untruths not only opens the door to an alternative reality, I believe it also allows us to see more clearly those who stand in solidarity with that alternative vision.

Our United Church creed begins with the words: "We are not alone, we live in God's world." We live with witnesses, with allies. We live in community with those who also see, those who also struggle. The prophet whispers to God, "There is only me Lord, I'm the only one." God sends wind. And after the wind, God whispers in that still, small voice: "There's still 7,000, go out and find them and join them." So our hope relies very much on our ability to intentionally seek out those who are with us. With us in the struggle, with us in the truth-telling, with us in the seeking of the alternatives.

As some of you know, the issue of housing has been a passion of mine for some time. I've participated in community as well as city-hall committees, and coalitions that have worked on housing. I was not just excited, I was elated this year when the local real-estate board appeared before city council to ask that budget dollars be set aside for affordable housing. That request, coming from that business-based body, made a difference, I believe, in the eventual decision by council to set aside \$2 million for housing. Not in any way to diminish the other voices, but this was a new voice from a new sector, and it contributed greatly to the alliance of those working to create that strong voice.

A couple of days ago I was contacted by a woman who was a member of the London chapter of the Business and Professional Women's Clubs of Ontario, which I didn't know anything

about. But she told me they had met with the Minister of Child and Family Services in Toronto and some other cabinet ministers, and had presented a brief outline of their concerns. She then sent me a copy of their document. It was a strong and well-articulated championing of the needs for affordable housing, and a call to the province to re-activate its participation in housing programs.

When we feel alone in the fight and our voices become diminished, it is often then that we hear the chorus of those other voices which are also raised in song. To work for the Kingdom does not entitle us to determine its timing or even its participants but to allow ourselves to be open to all the witnesses around us, the partnership of allies and others in community who are also naming the truths we encounter and persevering in that truth-telling.

Finally, let me say a little about that unpredictable and elusive power of the Spirit that enables the strange happenings that show us the Spirit at work in our world and lives. Once I went behind the barricade at Oka. For me it was a powerful experience of Spirit, of politics lived out in a particular moment of our history. It was a reminder to me that we people of the Spirit who feel called to exercise our resistance and solidarity as the Spirit leads us, need to be very careful in how we live.

But my consciousness of the Spirit might best be described by one experience that I had there. Toward the end of the crisis, I and another clergy left Oka as two other clergy had arrived to take our place. That very night, within hours of leaving, the tanks moved in on the barricades. We heard the news shortly after we left. Spontaneously, we turned around and headed back, with no idea of how we were ever going to get in.

In fact the new barricade, comprised of army tanks, was even more fortified than the native community barricade originally in place. We had no clearance to be there. We had handed over our clergy authorization to the two who had come to replace us. We didn't know any of the new troops who had now been sent to maintain this military wall.

We used our cell phones to try to make contact but without any success. So we pulled up in front of the barricade, facing hostile stares from those in charge of monitoring this cordoned-off military zone. I got out of the car and walked over to one of the guards and said, "We're here to go inside." He assured me abruptly that that was impossible. We were to get back in our car and leave the military zone.

His phone rang. He spoke. He signaled someone. Big tanks started moving. They opened up the gateway and directed us through and when our car was through the tanks moved back into place. No one else came through that barricade for five days.

Now I understand that he had confused us with an order that was meant for somebody else. But since then I've always called it the Oka-factor – the stirring up and confusing of those in power, that opens the door for alternative visions and hopes. The fall of power that crumbles and fails and allows new dimensions to take root, and grow, and new opportunities to come into existence. Perhaps I might even call it insurgent hope.

Rene Golden writes: "The fuel that drives courage is hope. Courage is a social gift of a people. Courage is not an individual characteristic, gender-specific, but rather a social-spiritual product of a liberation process. A secret weapon is the insurgent hope, that like a phoenix rises from the ashes of charred villages. Hope is in the hands that have been shackled and hearts that have been broken. They cannot bomb insurgent hope into oblivion. They cannot torture it to death. They cannot kill off hope in battle zones. It rises again, and again."

40 years of truth-telling. 40 years of working in coalition. 40 years of being open to the leading of the Spirit. May this be the first of many 40 years of public justice work for CPJ.

## Susan Eagle

Susan is an ordained United Church minister and a London City Councillor.

Susan has a well earned reputation as one of the most principled and compassionate voices on London City Council and in the United Church of Canada. She comes by her convictions and hard work for the disadvantaged honestly.



She's from a family of ministers who've all been dedicated to social justice in the Tommy Douglas style of service to community and country. Her late father and both of her grandfathers were United Church ministers. Susan's younger brother, Glen, followed her into ministry and the same social gospel tradition. Her mother, Joyce, a retired English and theatre arts teacher, is known for her theatrical productions, insightful and instructive children's stories and welcoming nature.

Susan has been minister of the Kilworth-Delaware congregations on the western edge of London for 19 years and a community worker for the East London United Church Outreach Cluster of six churches during the same period. In the outreach job, she has worked with and on behalf of sole support parents, the working poor, tenants, social assistance recipients and newcomers to Canada.

Susan, an honour's history graduate of Victoria University College at the University of Toronto and master's graduate of Emmanuel College at the Toronto School of Theology, was ordained by the United Church of Canada in 1977.



### **Public Justice Resource Centre**

[www.publicjustice.ca](http://www.publicjustice.ca) [info@publicjustice.ca](mailto:info@publicjustice.ca)

PJRC, founded in 1963, is a research and education organization that responds to God's call for love, justice, and stewardship in the understanding and discussion of core values and faith perspectives in Canadian public policy debates. It works closely with its sister organization, Citizens for Public Justice.



### **CITIZENS for PUBLIC JUSTICE**

[www.cpj.ca](http://www.cpj.ca) [cpj@cpj.ca](mailto:cpj@cpj.ca)

CPJ is a national, non-partisan organization that promotes justice in Canadian public affairs. CPJ responds to God's call for love, justice, and stewardship through research, education and advocacy. CPJ works closely with its sister organization, the Public Justice Resource Centre.

Suite 311, 229 College Street, Toronto, Ontario M5T 1R4  
Tel: 416-979-2443 Fax: 416-979-2458